



## HARBOR HERONS WILDLIFE REFUGE

S.C.Delaney/U.S.EPA

In the heart of New York City lies an environmental treasure partially created out of the provisions of the Clean Water Act and EPA enforcement. This "diamond-in-the-rough" is Harbor Herons Wildlife Refuge near Staten Island. Once a highly polluted area, the 278-acre refuge is now home to some 1,200 nesting pairs of herons, egrets and ibises. In fact, it is home to the largest colony of herons in New York State. During the spring and winter migrations, the refuge also serves as an important resting point along the Atlantic Flyway.

The area now comprising the refuge is situated in the Arthur Kill, an ocean waterway separating Staten Island from New Jersey. In the 1970s, the Arthur Kill was plagued with high levels of industrial pollution. Decades of misuse had degraded the Kill's tidal wetlands and driven waterfowl away. Beginning in the mid-1970s, however, permits issued under the Clean Water Act severely restricted discharges in the New York Harbor area. Over the next decade, water quality improved, the wetland ecosystem recovered and waterfowl populations returned and began to flourish.

In 1990, an untimely event stopped the area's recovery short. An underwater pipeline owned by Exxon ruptured in the Arthur Kill. Over 560,000 gallons of oil spilled from the ruptured pipe, damaging marsh grasses and ruining much of the area's habitat and food sources.

The EPA, along with other federal agencies, the State of New York, and local governments initiated a lawsuit to recover the damages caused by the spill. In the ensuing case, Exxon was required to pay a substantial fine and to establish a trust fund dedicated to restoring the natural resources damaged by the oil. Soon thereafter, land was purchased using the newly established fund, and was officially designated Harbor Herons Wildlife Refuge. The fund also acquired other wetlands in and around the New York Harbor area, and set these aside as public parks and conservation preserves.

From a troubled environmental past, the Arthur Kill and Harbor Herons Wildlife Refuge have emerged as examples of the benefits of environmental protection. Using creative enforcement practices such as trust funds and well-established environmental laws, the EPA and its partners have proven that sensitive ecosystems and wildlife can prosper in areas of high population and intense industrial development.



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